

Guard tanks training site after protests

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Call it the Battle of Northeast Clearfield County.

It went on for a year. It pitted landowners armed with petitions against the Pennsylvania National Guard.

And yesterday afternoon, the Guard surrendered.

In a statement released by the state Department of Military Affairs, the Guard said it was abandoning plans to build a controversial 4,700-acre tank training ground on a little-populated stretch of reclaimed strip mines just a 15-minute drive north of Interstate 80.

Maj. Gen. William Lynch, state adjutant general, blamed the decision on "persistent and vocal opposition" — a reference to local residents and area lawmakers who were bitterly critical of the proposal as a major disruption to remote Girard and Goshen townships.

According to Lynch, chances of getting necessary federal funding to run the facility were jeopardized by "a small but vocal group of opponents [who] would argue vigorously to the federal government about the project."

He also said the state had lingering concerns about acid mine drainage there. But the Guard leaves the region a little richer for having been there.

Had the state gone ahead with plans, it would have paid about \$4.35 million for the ground,

most of it empty, much of it reclaimed strip mines.

Sales agreements signed by the state Department of General Services, though, mean that owners of the property that the Guard wanted will get to keep 10 percent of the sales prices: \$435,857.

That's cash that Guard agreed to in order to keep the property off the market and to allow consultants free access to do environmental studies, Guard spokesman John Maietta said.

"We believe, and the Department of General Services will tell you, that it's very routine in real estate transactions," he said.

"From Day One, the Ridge administration and the Guard were told that the site ... was the wrong one and at the wrong price," state Rep. Camille "Bud" George, D-Clearfield, one of the loudest and most persistent critics, said in a statement released by his office last night. "Now, more than 12 months and \$430,000 later, they agree the people were correct."

The bulk of the money, \$326,259, will go to companies controlled by Clearfield County coal man C. Alan Walker, who became a lightning rod for critics — especially for Democratic lawmakers — because Walker and his family have been major contributors to Gov. Tom Ridge.

Guard officials and Ridge aides denied critics' claims that Walker held any sway in the choice of the property.

The Guard went hunting for the land four years ago, figuring it was too short on space at 19,200-acre Fort Indiantown Gap, 20 miles northeast of Harrisburg, to allow armed vehicles to maneuver and live-fire training to go on simultaneously.

Guard members are farmed out now for armored-vehicle training in Fort Drum, N.Y., and Fort Pickett, Va., Maietta said.